

ISOLATION - DOES IT REPRESENT A NEW STAGE OF POSTHUMANISM?

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Abstract

The beginning of 2020 represented an amazing change of paradigm. The individual - who reached the height of development - is faced with a microscopic entity difficult to include in the category of beings, but that reached - through simplification - another development pole. Will there be any winner or will they be forced to live together? The violent impact of the new coronavirus on humankind has rekindled and intensified the posthumanist approaches which consider that perceiving the Vitruvian man as the alpha and omega on Earth is inappropriate and even harmful to the planetary ecosystem. Humanists have to make one step back as the truly efficient education will be oriented towards the non-human which will finally get its well-deserved place. A series of simultaneous events at the global level seem to further reinforce this approach and to show that posthumanism has come to fruition. An essential contribution to using this perspective was made and will continue to be made by the media. This article is part of a series of studies which aim at highlighting "the new aspects of posthumanism triggered by the massive isolation of individuals."

Keywords: Covid-19, posthumanism, isolation of individuals, media, cyborg.

Foreword

At the beginning of December 2019, in a plane full of people from Bucharest to Madrid, one of the flight attendants was so ill that her nose was running like a faulty faucet. I remembered then that every time I flew on this route in the last 5 years at one of the members of the family that I was travelling with got such a serious cold that he or she had to stay in bed for at least 4 or 5 days. This also happened to me. One week after this event, every media channel started to talk about the cataclysm which already had a name - COVID-19.

1. COVID - THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE

COVID-19, the new coronavirus represents the most widely-used word on the planet in the last year. A simple research performed on the

information presented by the National Press Agency, Agerpres at the beginning of the phenomenon, shows that in March, when the Romanian authorities introduced the anti-COVID protection measures, from a total of 12057 news, 3362 (meaning 28%) referred to the pandemic which had covered the entire planet. In April, the next month, the number of headlines speaking about the SARS-CoV-2 virus increased from 5212 to 14.222 (37% din total number of broadcasted information).

A study during the period of the second wave shows that on October 10, 2020, out of a total number of 620 news broadcasted, 210 referred to COVID. In relative figures this means at least 34% of the broadcasted information. Ten days later, the situation from October 20, 2020 showed that 230 news of the of the 600 headlines published in 24 hours referred to the same horrible pandemic. In relative figures, this means over 38%. On the same date, two of the international press agencies, Reuters and AFP published information about COVID in 31%, respectively 28% of the total number of headlines.

This situation proves some sort of similarity with the news from the first part of the year, although we are in the middle of the second wave during which important events, such as the local elections, took place and this directed attention towards other things besides COVID-19. On the other hand, the balance is significantly better than with the TV stations where, during the first wave of the pandemic, the majority of the news (with the exception of the weather forecast) included words such as COVID, pandemic, epidemic, infection, sick people, death, etc. As a comparison, we remember that, at the previously-mentioned date, on the website

of a news television station, 32 out of a total of 68 headlines referred directly to the pandemic.

The almost permanent and monochromatic change of the structure of information was so violent that many people wondered (including journalists) how normal is this reaction of the press. Some reproaches even occurred regarding a too easy submission of journalists to the official news, which could amount to a certain lack of discernment on the part of those whose mission is to inform the public correctly and completely. Simultaneously there were accusations regarding information censorship and even due to an abuse of the authorities who ordered the closing of some websites with the argument that they were unknown to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MIHAI, 2020). After 30 years of freedom of speech and access to public interest information, even if imperfect, the Romanian press suddenly woke up in front of a high wall around the information that the authorities consider sensitive. A number of media institutions signalled the refusal of the people in charge to broadcast information regarding the number of people infected, from some of the counties of the country, a situation which led to a huge wave of protests. Censorship also appeared (COZMEI, 2020). The National Agency for Administration and Regulation in Communications (NAARC) forbade access to some sites that it accused of having broken the norms of the institutions during the pandemic (NAARC Decision no. 506/23.04.2020) (DC360, 2020). In time, the media landscape became more complicated, at the one end existing the "enslaved" media (CRISTOIU, 2020), and, at the other end, there are the deniers who, transformed into defenders of democracy and freedoms so far, challenge the danger of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and assign the pandemic to the global occult

2. IS POSTHUMANISM ONE STEP CLOSER?

How else could we perceive things when at least one out of three news speaks about such a simple entity that not even as a living structure can it be defined, but one which is so strong

that it questioned the entire human species (BRYNER, 2020).

How could this have happened? This is a very normal question as long as the authorities from most of the world's countries, coordinate by the World Health Organisation, rapidly adopted some unprecedented measures. The most "violent" form of protection was the house isolation of all people. Some jurists regarded it as "deprivation of liberty" under the form of "house arrest". For month in a row no one was allowed to leave the house with a special authorisation (even if it was just a statement on one's own responsibility). The elderly people were the most affected. Especially those who are alone. But not only. Because even the ones who have families were kept far away from their loved ones under the threat of becoming ill.

Besides forbidding the free movement and the "encapsulation" of the people in the house, the development of the pandemic came with measures that could be met only in science fiction movie: working from home, the closure of schools and a shift towards on-line teaching. The only living activity was therefore connected and facilitated by the computer, the most intelligent "house robot" of the moment. This situation was of course also analysed and explained from the perspective of the new posthumanist philosophy, whose adepts see the appearance of the SARS-CoV-2 virus as a fulfilment of their premonitions: self-placed in the centre of the universe, the individual got the situation out of control and nature turns against him. In the public space there have been attempts to express the impact that COVID-19 had and continues to have over the individual and to make the distinction "between" the human and the virus. This endeavour does not seem simple at all as it doubts the anthropocentric character of the modern world, offering it "an adequate feeling of modesty in order to reimagine the viable and durable worldly alliances" (TORRENT, 2020).

Therefore, the posthumanist studies which appeared following the outbreak of the pandemic seem to have one essential goal: to consolidate the right demonstrations in which regarding the human being as alfa or omega on Earth is completely counterproductive and this might even represent the reason for subsequent

obstacles in the way of progress. Moreover, the “development” of the virus led to lack of empathy between the individual and the virus. We find out that, the followers of the posthumanist conceptions are, if not the only ones, among the few who for whom the pandemic represents a great opportunity of opening new ways of understanding the world through giving up the idea of modernity by separating the individual from the nature. It is becoming more and more obvious that there is an attempt to attribute to the anthropocentric, as the current geological era is sometimes defined, the negative fingerprint that the human being could have placed on ecosystems. The only “purifying path” presented by the new academic environment would be the use of the life experiences of the indigenous populations in the anticipating discourses of the last generation. This would assume that universities insist on promoting some reparative practices through which former empires “honestly” pay their debts to their colonies and leave the stolen territories.

Frustration seems to stem from the fact that no report regarding COVID-19 is able to cover the knowledge need because all efforts are directed towards the individual and they ignore the “necessary symbiosis” with the virus. Ignasi Torrent considers that the unlimited human and theological progress is just a “fiction” brutally interrupted by the right virus, in a wrong manner, as an enemy and not as a partner of the individual. This problem between the human and the non-human (the virus) seems to legitimate a new stage in the posthumanist philosophy (TORRENT, 2020).

“In other words, the individual and coronavirus reinvent one another in the power relationships. [...] Therefore, the virus-human ontological boundary is compromised, making the mutual understanding of the two being more and more difficult. Finally, there is a little difference between the virus and the human being when we refer to their form of existence on the planet: a colonisation attempt interrupted by a mutually constitutive negotiation” (TORRENT, 2020).

For N. Katherine Hayles, the new coronavirus is posthuman because it exists regardless of the intentions, wishes and motives of the human being. It does not take into account the political parties, the religious beliefs, the gender or the

race. The morg seems to have become the end point of human experience, a place where the bodies devoid of life gather, after losing the battle with the terminator virus. The ideal image of a body fortified by advanced technologies or artificial intelligence vanished completely and nobody says one word about the forecasted miracles of transhumanism which promised the indefinite prolonging of human life. No matter how advanced it is or how many scientific progresses it records, mankind sees itself subordinated by an entity which developed at the antipodes. Humans have reached the top of their evolutionary pyramid (in their niche) through unprecedented cognitive complexity, language development with appropriate brain and body changes, cleverly crafted social structures, and a huge technical and technological leap increasingly supported by the artificial intelligence created exactly by the individual.

At the opposite pole, viruses evolved towards such an accentuated simplicity that their existence can no longer be defined exactly as belonging to the living sphere or not. Here we can also notice a form of “intelligence” because in their simplicity these entities are capable of overcoming the machineries of a cell and to use it in order to reproduce themselves (HAYLES, 2020). This parasitism does not represent the last form of a simplified existence because, according to Annu Dahia and Thomas Ray, the simplification which takes place at the antipode of a more and more complex becoming of the human being goes so far as to reach hyper-parasitism. Through this, every parasite species is in turn parasitized by another species with a shorter genome that allows it to multiply at a higher rate than its host. The conclusion could be that the fight between the human and the posthuman represents a clash of evolutive strategies: intelligence and advanced technologies versus the ability to quickly rejoin the very short genome of a virus of an extreme contagion through its power to disperse through the air and live for hours on a wide variety of surfaces. This is why people can be contagious before having any symptoms. This led to the hypothesis of the appearance of some new coronaviruses, extremely difficult to trace, a reason why they were labelled as stealth viruses.

“This could explain the enormous jump recorded by the SARS-CoV-2 virus from bats to the biggest mammal populating the Earth, people. Comparing the two strategies so far, the score is incredibly unilateral: coronavirus, 140000 and the number (of mutations) continues to grow; people, 0” (HAYLES, 2020).

A logic parasite! Or at least a profoundly discouraging one! Because in a century in which the individual reached the top of this development and there is no real threat of blocking this positive evolution, the medical authorities impose quarantine and isolation! One cannot stop wandering: what comes after this highly tight “encapsulation” which forbids even the funeral ceremonies? Dumitrescu and Smith (DUMITRESCU & SMITH, 2020) draw attention on some of the consequences of these measures. They distract attention (*acedia*) from the normal relationships between people but the repercussions of this mutation (even a mutilation of the self) are much more profound because they alter even the relationship between the human and the divinity and they produce alienation. The authors make references to *kedos* and to those meanings of the concept which refer to the attachments that appear between people and which bonds them. *Kedos* is so profound that it even refers to the funeral rituals which today are restricted to a limited number of people.

“Acedia is a special type of distracting attention which appears when the bonds between people and those with God are interrupted: a solitary wandering of the mind.” (DUMITRESCU & SMITH, 2020).

But how important are these contingencies? And where eventually can you delay or forbid them? According to Emmanuel Alloa there are situations in which the sanitary crisis fortified the solidarity between relatives or neighbours. And from this point of view, there is no sort of equality between the physical and social distance and we cannot even speak about an equivalence with social distancing!

“[...] social life did not disappear in the era of general prison” (ALLOA, 2020).

But social distancing is yet to come! It will be much more profound and it take place faster and faster on a long term even if at this moment it is not very visible due to the consequences that isolation will have on education. The shift towards online education forced the introduction

and generalisation of the computer systems in schools. The investments seem minor in comparison to the ordinary expenses for the development of classes in schools. Far from ignoring the well-known material difficulties of the classical teaching system, the need for performant computers in order to support the teacher-student dialogue mostly transferred into the budgets of the families which children who go to school. On the one side, in laptops, tablets etc and in the respective supplies. On the other hand, the electricity and Internet bills went up significantly. In general, electricity supply is mostly stable. Despite the reassurance of the authorities which believe that “in case there is no electricity students can use tele-school”, there is however a very real problem. Over 52 000 households in Romania are not connected to the electricity and this perspective is still very far away for them (DINU, 2020). On the other hand, although the 5G technology is intensively discussed, not even the most important Internet suppliers cannot guarantee the necessary continuity and speed so that the online classes can take place normally. It is still not enough. All pedagogical mastery that the teacher uses to teach his students remains sterile in from of the camera on the mean bidimensional scene of the monitor. All efforts of the individuals behind the new virtual teaching desks to transform the only being who has to be educated in order to become HUMAN, as Kant claimed, will be devoid of any efficiency. The harmony of the classroom, the psychological temperature of the group, the consonance and the clash of the interests of the disciples - future active citizens, the common effort to shape “the perspective of the future happiness of the human race” will have to be reprojected on new patterns (KANT, 2015). It remains to be seen how it will be modelled on zoom the interpersonal relationship of supervision and intervention between the preceptor (the man in the chair) and the future “gentleman” of whom John Locke (LOCKE, 2013) spoke in the seventeenth century. And, in the same way, one will have to study the ways in which obstacles will be eliminated from the normal development of the human being, which Jean-Jacques Rousseau (ROUSSEAU, 1958) spoke about.

Willingly or not the large-scale use of robots under the form of computers, tablets or smartphones make us also remember the more and more spread posthumanist philosophy which, according to some of its representatives, might be capable of answering these challenges. We try to ignore the fact that class atomisation – one of the most important keys to human society – leads, in its turn, to the dissipation of humanism itself, inconceivable otherwise than in the great family of people. In a paper published in 2019, the “escape” year of the new coronavirus from the labs of the global science, Rosi Braidotti (BRAIDOTTI, 2006; BRAIDOTTI, 2019) considered that as strange as it might seem to us, the posthumanism incorporated in the school curricula might have beneficial effects on the teaching system. In order for it to have the expected efficiency, it should take place at the same time with the inclusion of the posthumanist values in academic institutions. The subjects of the teaching activity might therefore be encouraged to think “beyond the individual and the space freed in this way might be occupied by other *nonhumans*”. This would basically mean an authentic critical thinking in which, like in a crucible, defamiliarization and sensitivity would melt. Although, in August, at the time of the publishing of the paper, the pandemic had not started yet, the author seemed to know what was going to happen and offered the necessary solution to the new realities: a posthuman and postdisciplinary university, in which the best practical and relational oriented teaching style would be a stereoscopic, hybrid perspective, with an emphasis on difference (KOOLE, 2019). If we add here the perspective of Donna Haraway who perceives writing (for example) mainly as a cyborg technology, the future of the human being on the old Terra seems less black.

“We did not initially choose to be cyborgs, but the choice is based on a liberal politics and epistemology which imagines the reproduction of individuals prior to the more ample replication of texts” (HARRAWAY, 1991).

This statement forbids any right to reply and seems ready to pave the way for speculation towards the theory of conspiracy. It represents the simplest option, but it does not provide any answer to the increasing number of question marks.

3. THE VITRUVIAN MAN - NEW STIGMATIZATIONS

Accidentally or not, during the first wave of the pandemic, the classical image of humanism (the all mighty, white, European, imperialist male) suffered another as equally brutal attack. It started in the United States following the death of the African American George Floyd following an incident with a policeman. This event became the culmination of an upward slope that originated in 2012, when another white police officer, accused of killing an African-American teenager, was acquitted. The hostile attitude towards the white, labelled under the guise of left-wing extremism, amplified at the level of the United States of America following the death of another two African Americans in 2014. The Black Lives Matter movement, which developed continuously, gained some international dimensions during previous summer. The protest in Romania, for example (without representing an exception), clearly signals the connections between the pandemic and the interventions of the authorities (which the Romanian society has also confronted with starting from the first anti-Covid measures), but it observes only the ones against people of other colours than the white colour.

“We condemn white supremacy in all its forms: systemic racism, the crimes and violence of the police, the patriarchy, capitalism, classicism, hatred against women, transgender and sex workers” (CHIRCIU, 2020), as if all these reproaches could be made exclusively against the white race.

And, if Bucharest situated itself at the antipode, the extremist message just transpires, in America violence against the white was clearly presented, directly and/or indirectly, also encouraged by the participation in the funerals of George Floyd of some prominent political figures and their assumed speech (IANCU, 2020). It remains to be seen to what extent the elections for the seat in the Oval Office will either amplify or reduce existing tensions, that the press is quite aware of.

4. A REPEATED QUESTION: POSTHUMANISM OR TRANSHUMANISM?

Information regarding the acceleration of the precise integration of technology within the human body appeared especially in the second decade of the century. We were already used to the idea that in order to annihilate de “terminator” Covid-19 we should expect substantial help, maybe even the miracle of an invincible army from the same field. On October 18, 2019, the same day the Military Olympics began in Wuhan, China, the first pieces of information appeared regarding the outbreak of a pandemic following the loss of control of an extremely dangerous virus within the local laboratories. Also, the Robotic Business Review publication offered a general presentation of the most recent progresses from the field of nanobots, capable of answering the new challenges from the medical field (HARRISON, 2019).

Confirmation came from the laboratories of the San Diego University in California this year, in summer. Specialists say that the Covid-19 virus pushed the nanotechnologies in the first rows of research. On June 1, 2020 there were already 157 candidates for the anti-Covid vaccine which contains nanobots (CONNOR, 2020). Here, we should also add the humanist dimension of introducing the new scientific accomplishments. The amounts raised in this area exceed the budgets of many highly developed countries by far. If up to 2016, the nanomedicine market amounted to 112 billion dollars (~95,39 billion EURO), it is expected to have a double figure by 2023 (261,06 billion USD).

Due to this pandemic and the avalanche of contradictory information, no matter how much they will be able to help the life and health of the human being, new technologies will be viewed with distrust, as an attempt to intensify the robotization of humanity, the same aspect that Donna Haraway (HARAWAY, 1991) seemed to have suggest back in 1991. We are at war against the non-human or even against the in-human, as Vasile Mihalache suggests. He also sees here a tangle of the battle between the human and non-human resembling alien movies (MIHALACHE,

2020). This leaves us with only one step until we reach Asimov’s imagined perspective, in the well-known heptalogy. Robots are designed to help people, to solve their problems, to defend them from the other people who want to hurt their masters. And at the end of all this, they quietly wait for new orders. Do people begin to retreat in their own niches and expect, with masks on their faces, the things that the administration requires from them? Because one thing is clear. Everything that happened starting from the beginning of 2020 overturns all the meanings attributed so far to social organization. It still remains to be seen who the robots are and how the new individuals will look like.

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